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ABSTRACT

Six points appear prominently in modern theory of composition: theory basks in the shadow of literary criticism and scholarship; writing is an act involving creativity, of which theory should take account; creativity depends upon the primacy of personal insight, which is also the basis of intellectual development; the grapholect of standard edited American English is the suitable literary medium for a creatively discovered personal point of view; the grapholect is the suitable literary medium for all discourse of disinterested inquiry; and freshman English is an initiation into the liberal arts or at least to the trivium. As these points imply, the primary purpose of theory of composition is to provide a rationale for the composition instructor as a defender and a promoter of the grapholect and all it stands for and belongs to. The difficulty for the theorist and practitioner is to define the defense and the promotion of literary culture. What most theoretical work demonstrates is that accomplished writing is not an arcane art but a skill rather like that of any complex craft. (TJ)

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# A Brief Critique of Some Modern Theories of Composition

The purpose of this paper is to define some six points which appear prominently in modern theory of composition. Such a task is necessary because these points do not appear at once in the work of any single theorist; the state of our art is, if not disparate or fragmented, then various and protean: analytic not synthetic. Even so, taken as a whole, or as a whole represented by typical theoretical work, a pattern does emerge. In tracing out this pattern, I do not offer a new theory of composition, but focus instead on what may be the assumed pattern--the unacknowledged meta-theory, if you will--upon which theorists with special interests may depend. At any event, this is a speculative task, based on selected evidence, and resembles synedoche as much as it is a critique. My method will be straight-forward: take up each point serially, and then arrive at a conclusion about the primary purpose of theory of composition.

Point 1: theory basks in the shadow of literary criticism and scholarship. To prove this point one need look no farther than the evidence upon which the theories rest: analysis of the work of accomplished writers, often writers whose work is highly regarded by critics and scholars. Student writing is rarely offered as evidence; when it is it is usually first-rate.[1] In the active area of syntactical exercises--based on Christensen's theory--sentence combining depends on pre-written simple sentences which the student synthesizes into longer, complex, and therefore more mature structures.[2] Christensen's own seminal theoretical essays depend upon analysis of accomplished writing.[3] Perhaps the most recent example of this point is Corder's "Varieties of Ethical Argument, With Some Account of the Significance of Ethos in the Teaching of

Composition" which appeared in Freshman English News.[4] Approximately one of the fifteen double-columned pages devoted to Corder's essay relates to student composition; no piece of student writing is adduced. But as a demonstration of catholic literary taste, literary sensibility, and aesthetic sensitivity, it is a belletristic piece par excellence. The list could be extended--certainly another high point would be Winterowd's analysis of poetry as a basis for rhetorical theory[5]--but more important in this context are the implications of this literary bias. First, the bias implies that composition theorists are primarily literary critics, and it is their insights as critics that provide the basis for a pedagogical discipline of writing. Second, it implies that accomplished writing yields a standard toward which novice writers can work--a standard attainable by imitation (in the broadest sense) and use of the theorists' insights.

Point 2: writing is an act involving creativity of which theory should take account. This point is a corollary of Point 1, since the best of the accomplished writing (e.g., George Orwell) is considered to be creative. The nature of the evidence upon which most theorists rely leads them to consider creativity, or at least it opens up this topic for consideration by other theorists. Recent work in creativity has focused on invention or pre-writing; the assumption here is that the task of writing itself will be more creative (produce prose more like that of the masters) if the writer plans extensively beforehand. The work of Rohman, Lauer, Zoellner and the tagmemic school is typical.[6] The implications of this point go off in many directions. First, since all good writing aspires to the condition of art, theory must take into account aesthetic considerations such as proportion, structure, design, tone, and so forth.[7] The aim, the ultimate goal, is to produce a complex writing, not a simpler workaday sort. Second, creativity requires freedom of expression and creativity is a function of genius

(which presumably each person possesses to some degree); therefore the schemes which are supposed to foster creativity must be general, and certainly not bound to any set of data or to any intellectual content. The creativity theorist must establish the prime conditions--furnish the workshop--but not set the topic. Let the potter work her own clay, and let her choose which sort of clay as well.

Point 3: creativity depends upon the primacy of personal insight which is also the basis of intellectual development. The unexamined life is not worth living: this dictum takes on new meaning in light of the work of Piaget and Bruner and in turn that of Moffett and Odell.[8] Against the model of developmental psychology and studies of cognitive growth in children the composition theorists have fashioned a kind of hierarchy of writing forms and tasks which apply to the several levels of personal maturity. This theoretical point agrees well with the tradition of assigning topics for student writing which are to be taken from personal experience (the classic example: "What I Did Last Summer"). The creativity-in-composition theorists draw on a tradition of English studies established nearly a century ago when our discipline took on the role of fostering creativity as self-expression.[9] They are also probably influenced--though it is difficult to prove conclusively--by the notion of the writer as modern artist who must necessarily work out of personal experience because of alienation. Surely evidence for this point is Burke's positing "identification" for the new rhetoric in contrast to "persuasion" for the old--the modern writer attempts to establish common ground with the audience which the old one assumed as a basis for persuasion.[10] The necessity of personal insight, expressed by both a personal voice and a point of view, was given recent emphasis by Ohmann, whose analysis of governmental prose demonstrated that its ideological corruption can be explained largely by the absence of these two factors.[11] A similar distress signal was sounded in a study of the so-called competent writing of students

at Yale.[12] It is likely that the rhetorical concern of ethos, the stylistic one of voice, and the ideological focus of Ohmann belong under the rubric of Point 3.

Point 4: the grapholect of standard edited American English is the suitable literary medium for a creatively discovered personal point of view. Despite some recent work about the student's right to her own language, few theorists incorporate that view in their schemes. Indeed, Hirsch gives considerable space in The Philosophy of Composition to the necessity and advantages of the grapholect, and Fisher, in a scholarly article not directly concerned with composition but nevertheless quite relevant to it, traces the ancestry of a standard English to the origins of British civil service.[13] This point represents the most conservative tendency in composition theory, and the fact that acceptable student writing must conform to the grapholect anchors even the most extravagent recommendations for creativity and insight to a solid tradition of written expression. No matter how high the balloon of inspiration may soar, it is still tethered securely. The conservative grapholect implies that English prose written since Caxton is more or less of a piece, despite certain shifts of style, and therefore a Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, with its emphasis on imitation of accomplished writing, is a certain guide to grapholectic fluency.[14] The grapholect may be used to explain the theorists' preoccupation with analysis of accomplished writing, because a thorough understanding of the grapholect in action, as it were, may be an exercise by which the composition theorist teaches writing instructors how the standard may vary from student performance. Both theorist and instructor keep one eye on the grapholect at all times; their hope is that the student writer will do likewise.

Point 5: the grapholect is the suitable literary medium for all dis-

course of disinterested inquiry, i.e., writing for academic, professional or business purposes. Theorists assume that the grapholect is transferable from one kind of subject to another, and is therefore content-free. In the case of sentence-combining, maturity of writing is calculated strictly in terms of syntactical considerations.[15] The theorists aren't concerned with intellectual content, except in an occasional aside such as Miles' in "What We Compose."[16] She mentions the problem of teaching students to write effectively in their major fields of concentration, a subject to which the University of Michigan will turn its attention in the next three years as it institutes an upper-division writing requirement. Possibly the theorists of composition will turn their attention to the problem of intellectual content--certainly Michigan has the theorists who are capable. This point may be the least examined of those I raise here, and the development of subject-specific theories of composition (e.g., the rhetoric of engineering) offers an exciting prospect for the future.

Point 6: Freshman English is an initiation into the liberal arts or at least to the trivium. This point, I think, is the real burden of the brilliant theoretical work of Kinneavy.[17] His work in the aims and modes of discourse is in great part a magisterial attempt to reunite the fragmented trivium, although his insight into the character of Freshman English as an anthropological phenomenon also bears serious consideration.[18] The notion--perhaps part nostalgia, though not much--that the basic course in writing is the vestige of a liberal arts tradition may explain in turn three other aspects. First, the teaching of writing must not be subject-specific because the strategies and tactics should work for writing about all the arts and sciences; it would be narrowly provincial to teach students only how to write about literature. Second, the conservative grapholect reflects a tradition of written expression at least as old as printing--

which in English means as old as Renaissance traditions of learning. Learning to write the grapholect is joining the liberal arts tradition in a basic way. Third, because the goal of the liberal arts is to educate so as to expand one's consciousness of intellectual and cultural knowledge (a troubling goal in any society where free thinking and dissent is discouraged), the daring schemes of heuristics, invention and general brain-storming which some theorists propose are reasonable and to be expected. These aspects can explain why composition theory viewed broadly may appear disparate, since at once one can apprehend these characteristics so as to describe them (though unsympathetically) as vague, rigid, and provocative, rather than, say, as general, traditional, and challenging.

These half-dozen points do not survey the field in the same manner as Tate's Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, although the contents of this useful volume could be reorganized under them as a kind of rubric for a composition meta-theory. This task is not one I recommend, although I do think these six points can provide a useful, handy, and very portable vade mecum for probing the assumptions of quite a high percentage of current theoretical proposals and arguments. At one point in writing this paper, I had included a sub-title, now discarded: "Waiting for Copernicus." As the points came into focus, however, so too did the nature of composition theory, which describes not a scientific but a cultural phenomenon. I do not expect a theorist to construct a separate set of six points which will radically alter our view of composition; however, it is entirely possible that theorists who turn at least part of their attention to these basic assumptions will produce very interesting and useful work. By testing assumptions, we clarify and strengthen them.

The primary purpose of theory of composition, it can be deduced from these six points, is to provide a rationale for the composition instructor as a defender and a promoter of the grapholect and all it stands for and belongs to.

Because writing is a phenomonen of literary culture--of a specific set of social values--the pedagogic function is essentially a cultural and social function. The difficulty for both the theorist and the practitioner (this is a role distinction, since most theorists are also practitioners) is to define the defense and the promotion of literary culture; it is hypothetically possible that certain knowledge and pedagogic techniques will be appropriate to the one but not to the other. The roles may be symbiotic, as it were. A possible source of confusion for theorist and practitioner alike can be demonstrated by referring to Point 1. It is likely that most theoretical work, relying as it does on accomplished writing, is useful in the defense of literary culture. What most work demonstrates is that accomplished writing is indeed analyzable by means which suggest that writing is not an arcane art that requires the Muse to inspire but a skill rather like that of any complex craft. On the other hand, promoting literary culture--by which I mean simply instructing students how to write--may require a different kind of theory, although exactly what that might be is debatable. Demonstrations about accomplished writing, the defense, may predispose students to join up, so to speak, but making them active members of the literary culture is another matter. The extent to which we are conflating defense and promotion can be judged by simply taking up one's favorite textbook, reading the explanation of an aspect of composition, and then analyzing the exercises which follow it up. If your experience is like mine, we share a shock of recognition. We need not abandon the defense of literary culture, and I think it is reasonable that students who are convinced of the value of writing--accomplished work by masters--will be eager to try their own hand at it. It will give them a sense of a great tradition, and a demonstrably accessible one, to which they can actively contribute. Now all we have to do is discover ways to teach them to write; if our theoreticians are as elegant and successful in

the promotion as they have been in the defense, we will have defended what we hold valuable and created a literate educated class.

NOTES

[1]See for instance Glee Crocker, "Are Brand Names Best?" in James L. Kinneavy, John Q. Cope, and J. W. Campbell, Aims and Audiences in Writing (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1976), pp. 103-107.

[2]See for instance Kathleen Hart and Alice Heim, Sentences, Paragraphs and Essays: An Integrated Approach, forthcoming from Little Brown Co.; William Strong, Sentence Combining (New York: Random House, 1973).

[3]Conveniently collected in The Sentence and the Paragraph (Urbana: NCTE, n.d.).

[4]FEN, 6 (1978), entire issue No. 3: a sample of literary references includes Gulliver's Travels, The Gettysburg Address, and Pope's "An Essay on Criticism."

[5]W. Ross Winterowd, "Beyond Style," in his Contemporary Rhetoric (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 207-224, in which poems by Chaucer, Jeffers and Ginsberg are analyzed; see also his "The Grammar of Coherence" in the same collection, pp. 225-233, for analysis of Shakespearean sonnets.

[6]D. Gordon Rohman, "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," CCC, 16 (1965), 106-12; Janice Lauer, "Heuristics and Composition," in Contemporary Rhetoric, pp. 79-90 (essentially an unannotated check-list of sources for further research); Robert Zoellner, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," CE, 30 (1969); Richard E. Young, et al, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

[7]Since every theorist considers one or more aesthetic aspects of writing, annotation of this point is unnecessary.

[8]Jean Piaget, To Understand Is to Invent, tr. George-Anne Roberts (New York: Grossman, 1973) and The Psychology of Intelligence, tr. Malcolm Piercy and D. E. Berlyne (London: Routledge and Paul, 1950); Jerome Brunner, On Knowing

(Cambridge, USA: Harvard, 1963); James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968); Lee Odell, "Piaget, Problem-Solving, and Freshman Composition," CCC 24 (1973), 36-42.

[9]Kenneth J. Kantor, "Creative Expression in the English Curriculum: An Historical Perspective," RTE (9) 1975, 5-29.

[10]Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric--Old and New," JGE 5 (1951), 203-209; A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: California UP,1969); and A Rhetoric of Motives (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1949).

[11]Richard Ohmann, English in America (New York: Oxford, 1976), pp. 93-206.

[12]Paula Johnson and Judith D. Hackman, "The Yale Average: or, After Competence, What?" CCC 38 (1977), 227-231.

[13]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1977), esp. 33-50; John H. Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century," Speculum, 52 (1977), 870-899.

[14]Written by Edward P. J. Corbett, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1971); see also his "The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric," CCC 14 (1963), 24-26 and "What is Being Revived?" CCC 18 (1967), 166-172.

[15]Francis Christensen, "The Problem of Defining a Mature Style," EJ 57 (1968), 572-579.

[16]Josephine Miles' essay appears in Richard L. Graves, Rhetoric and Composition (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1976), pp. 183-192.

[17]James L. Kinneavy. "The Basic Aims of Discourse," CCC 20 (1969), 297-304; Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971); and "Theories of Composition and Actual Writing," Kansas English 59 (1973), 3-17.

[18]James L. Kinneavy, "Freshman English: An American Rite of Passage," FEN 6, no. 1 (1977), 1-3.